Research article

Exploring Approaches to Developing Oracy and Early Literacy in Children Transitioning to Formal Foreign Language Instruction: Interactive Storytelling in Focus

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ABSTRACT. This paper provides a brief overview of research evidence of language-based interventions designed to support oral language and early literacy development in young learners of English in primary school contexts. It focuses particularly on interactive storytelling and its efficacy across contexts, followed by discussing ways of effectively promoting the technique in the Japanese EFL context.

【Keywords】oracy, oral language, interactive storytelling, English as a foreign language

The number of children being offered foreign language (FL) instruction in school settings is constantly on the rise. Furthermore, many countries are lowering the age at which primary school children begin FL learning as part of the curriculum (Murphy, 2014). Japan is no exception to this global trend, in which context Foreign Language (predominantly English) Activities (FLA), known as *Gaikokugokatsudō* in Japanese, has been implemented nationwide as a compulsory area of study for pupils in Years 5–6 since 2011. The objective of FLA is specified in the Course of Study as follows (MEXT, 2010):

'To form the foundation of pupils' communication abilities through foreign languages while developing the understanding of languages and cultures through various experiences, fostering a positive attitude toward communication, and familiarizing pupils with the sounds and basic expressions of foreign languages.'

The primary objectives of FLA thus lie in placing emphasis on developing oracy (listening and speaking) in children through communicative activities that are closely linked to real-life experiences and topics being previously or currently explored in other subject-matter areas in the primary curriculum. FLA is currently not classified as a subject but as a compulsory area of study for pupils in Years 5–6 to attend once a week. As such, unlike other subjects such as mathematics and science, no formal, numerical evaluation of learning outcomes and progression is involved.

It is increasingly anticipated that the starting age for learning English as part of the primary curriculum will be lowered to 8–9 years of age (corresponding to Years 3–4) in 2018, when the next edition of the Course of Study will be issued (MEXT, 2014). According to MEXT (2014), classes of FLA are likely to be offered to pupils in Years 3–4, whereas pupils in Years 5–6 are anticipated to commence EFL learning as a subject on a national level by 2020. In the latter case, the current objectives of EFL learning are expected to be modified so that it will tap not only oracy but also early literacy experiences (e.g., reading and writing the al-

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phabet). Such an educational reform will aim to provide a foundation upon which to develop communicative competence of a more comprehensive nature in children and also to better prepare them for the subsequent, more advanced learning of EFL in secondary school education.

One outstanding challenge ahead of the reform is perhaps a lack of consensus amongst researchers, teachers and practitioners on how to prepare primary school pupils transitioning into secondary school education for formal EFL instruction. This paper addresses this issue by exploring language-based approaches to early literacy, drawing on the literature on both first (L1) and second language (L2) acquisition. In so doing, particular foci are placed on oral language interventions featuring interactive storytelling. This focus stems from the established links in the literature between oral language and the subsequent acquisition of more sophisticated literacy skills and ultimately educational achievement (e.g., Dockrell, Stuart & King, 2010; Kieffer, 2008).

Oral language interventions for young learners

Oral language forms one of the important precursor skills required for learning to read (Mol, Bus & de Jong, 2009). Reading, one of the core aspects of learning in school, is a highly complex activity involving the intricate coordination of cognitive processes including lower-level (e.g., vocabulary, phonemic awareness) and higher-level processes (e.g., background knowledge, inferencing) (Hoover & Gough, 1990; Grabe & Stoller, 2011). It is therefore paramount to ensure that children develop sufficient levels of oral language so that they can access and accelerate in the curriculum they follow (Dockerell et al., 2010). To that end, a range of oral language interventions have been designed and implemented in support of early literacy development in young learners including those learning the medium of instruction as the L1 or the L2 and those receiving FL instruction as part of the primary curriculum, as described below per context.

L1 contexts

Reading Recovery. One of the globally recognised oral language interventions to date is *Reading Recovery* (RR). RR is an individual-based, standardised preventative programme for young literacy learners. RR was originally developed by Dame Marie Clay in New Zealand in the late 1970s and has since been widely adopted in several countries including New Zealand, the United Kingdom, Ireland and United States. RR is designed for those judged as at-risk readers after receiving a full year of schooling, based on the results of the Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement (Clay, 1993), which consists of six components: a running record on text reading; letter identification; dictation; concepts about print; sight words; and writing vocabulary. The primary focus of RR is to assist targeted pupils to accelerate and make sufficient progress so that they can catch up with their average-reader peers (Reynolds & Wheldall, 2007). In each 30-minute daily session given by a trained RR teacher, children engage in a number of literacy activities related to texts graded for their level, such as repeated reading of previously introduced texts, letter/word identification, story writing and reading of a new book (Clay, 1993). Children discontinue with RR once they are predicted to be able to perform on classroom literacy activities independently (Clancy, 2009;

Reynolds & Wheldall, 2007).

RR has been recognised worldwide as one of the most successful interventions which yield both reliable short-term gains and emerging long-term gains on reading achievement and closing attainment gaps between low-achieving pupils and their peers (e.g., Brown, Denton, Kelly & Neal, 1999; Reynolds & Weldall, 2007). The implementation of RR has been extended to L2 learners. In the UK context, for instance, it has been successfully offered to children with English as an additional language (see Clancy, 2009 for details).

The Japanese Language classes. In Japan also, oral reading has been increasingly recognised as a central aspect of effective provision for improving reading comprehension in the national curriculum since the 1977 edition of the Course of Study and its successful implementation in classroom activities has been documented in recent studies (e.g., Okada & Iwanaga, 2005; Wakui, 2007). The focus of oral reading in this context differs from that of the RR as presented above in that the former is not designed to be preventative targeting lower-achieving pupils but to nurture and foster language awareness in Japanese-L1 children. One unique case is *The Japanese Language,* a subject introduced in the special educational zones of Setagaya-Ku, Japan in 2007. These Japanese language classes are provided, separately from the regular classes of Japanese as a national language, called *Kokugo* in Japanese. The overarching aim of the new Japanese Language class is to foster the expressive skills of children via an increased awareness of cultural values associated with the language, beyond the *Kokugo* classes (Setagaya City, 2009). This aim is achieved by engaging children in various oral reading activities across genres, such as *tanka* (a short Japanese poem arranged in lines of five, seven, five, seven and seven syllables), *haiku* (a poem with a 5-7-5 syllabic form) and the Analects (historical Chinese commentaries called *Rongo* in Japanese).

L2 contexts

Interactive storytelling. Book reading is considered the primary way for young learners to develop vocabulary and print knowledge, two pillars of learning to read (Mol et al., 2009). One reading technique deemed effective for stimulating these two pillars and gaining increasingly positive attention in the L2 (as well as in L1) acquisition literature is *interactive storytelling*. Interactive storytelling entails shared book reading and extension activities (Wasik & Bond, 2001). It involves rich interactions between the child(ren) and the adult(s) (e.g., parents, teachers) which go beyond the text of the story and extend to such activities as linking the story to children's own experiences, explicit instruction about target vocabulary items and repeated readings (Coyne, Simmons, Kame'enui & Stoolmiller, 2004). Although empirical evidence remains diverse and contradictory concerning the magnitude of its efficacy on later literacy and academic skills (Hindman, Connor, Jewkes & Morrison, 2008; Wasik & Bond, 2001), the general consensus seems to be that interactive storytelling acts as a valuable way to support vocabulary and language development in children learning an L2 in a context where the L2 is the societal language.

One recent example of an oral language intervention is called *Talking Time*, which was implemented by Dockrell, Stuart and King (2010). *Talking Time* was designed to meet the language learning needs of preschool English language learners (ELLs) with limited levels of

English (L2) proficiency from disadvantaged circumstances. *Talking Time* included the following three activities:

a. Act Out: vocabulary learning involving a series of dramatic activities using target vocabulary;
b. Story Talk: an activity involving the children drawing literal and inferential conclusions through constructing discussions around pictures in the book and linking the story to their real-life experiences;
c. The Hexagon Game: an activity designed to support the production of narrative text by connecting visual stimuli (pictures) on hexagonal cards to form a series of narrative stories.

The *Talking Time* group was compared to two groups each receiving two contrasting interventions: story reading (regular exposure to books read by adults in small groups) and non-intervention entailing locally recommended 'good oral practice'.

The positive effects of the interventions were pronounced in the *Talking Time* group, who performed significantly higher on the L2 measures of oral (sentence) comprehension, expressive vocabulary and sentence repetition, in comparison to the other groups. No significant between-group differences were identified on the measure of narrative production, however. The lack of intervention effects on the narrative task led the researchers to argue for the need for more intensive interventions which would be tracked over longer periods of time using measures that are sensitive to a constantly developing nature of L2 knowledge of children. These findings, taken together, corroborate the much-agreed-upon view (e.g., Mol et al., 2009) that both the nature of book reading and its frequency in classroom (as well as home) settings are essential for promoting early literacy in beginning L2 learners.

FL contexts

As described earlier, increasingly FL contexts around the world are lowering the age at which children receive FL instruction. In the context of FL (predominantly English) pedagogy in Japan, it is anticipated that FLA, currently practised as a compulsory area of study for pupils in Years 5–6 (aged 10–12), will be offered to those in Years 3–4 (aged 7–9), and that English will be introduced as a subject to the former year groups in 2018. In keeping with such imminent curricular and instructional reforms, together with cognitive readiness in children in terms of Piaget's theory of cognitive child development (Piaget, 2001) taken into account, growing attempts have been made to offer classroom-based interventions entailing early literacy experiences, such as phonics (e.g., Kishigami, 2010), alphabetical knowledge (e.g., Allen-Tamai, 2008), storytelling (e.g, Allen-Tamai, 2011; Carreira-Matsuzaki, Shigyo, Simoda & Sakamoto, 2010). Two interventions are presented below for their distinctive approaches to fostering oral language through reading and accompanied extension activities.

Joint storytelling. The first example is *joint storytelling,* an early literacy intervention designed and implemented by Allen-Tamai (2011). *Joint storytelling* forms one of the primary activities of a multi-faceted intervention. This activity is of particular significance here since it involves interaction and collaboration both between the teacher and pupils, and among the pupils for constructing the stories in English, of which they had an established schema through exposure in the L1 (e.g., '*The Giant Turnip*',

'*MOMOTARO the Peach Boy*', '*Jack and the Beanstalk*').

A significant feature of this intervention lies in that both bottom-up and top-down approaches to oral production were used in a complementary manner, which served as a basis for the children to engage in the subsequent, more independent reading activities. Bottom-up activities included orally practising individual words, phrases and sentences both in decontexualised format (e.g., repeating after the teacher) and to the music (chants and songs). In top-down activities, the teacher provided the children with a scaffolded discussion of the story whilst activating their prior knowledge, eliciting recalls of story elements, and facilitating making inferences about how the story unfolds.

An expansion on these interactive oral activities was exposure to print, whereby the teacher engaged the children in reading the original text (approximately 330-500 words in length) on which the previous joint storytelling activity was based. The experience of being able to match a sound to its correct letters—knowledge of grapheme-phoneme correspondences—elicited the following metalinguistic responses from the children (translated by the author for this paper) (Allen-Tamai, 2011:25):

- 'Oh it is 'haven't', is it? I always said 'No, we have'.
- I never knew you need the 'a' between 'I'm' and 'Troll' . Why is it the case?

Recall that FLA in Japan revolves around promoting language awareness in children through oracy rather than focussing on the acquisition of literacy-related skills (reading and writing), as stipulated in the Course of Study presented above. In this regard, children generating such metalinguistic comments can be viewed as one of the positive outcomes of this intervention, especially in terms of a smooth transition into more formal instruction at secondary school. These comments could be interpreted as signalling the children's growing motivation for, and positive outlook on further EFL learning. Thus, although getting children to read a passage of that length range in FLA seems like too large a burden on them, providing literacy-based instruction which is made psycho-linguistically accessible to them through appropriate scaffolding and interaction helps boost their attitudes and motivation for EFL learning as a subject.

ICT reading materials. An additional example of a reading-based intervention is one by Carreira-Matsuzaki, Shigyo, Simoda and Sakamoto (2010). Carreira-Matsuzaki et al. investigated the effects of ICT reading materials called LeapFrog TAG Reading System (abbreviated TRS henceforth) on the learning of target vocabulary items from the materials in 70 primary school pupils in Year 5 in Japan. TRS is an electronic pen which stores reading materials and can be used with books in the Tag Reader library and other compatible books. Users can sound out the words or phrases in the book by hovering the pen with a censor at the end over these vocabulary items. Additional sound effects include clicking on pictures, which will produce music. The children were instructed to read materials of their choice included in the TRS outside of class and were tested on 10 target items before and after the 10-day reading programme. Whilst the children's attitude towards reading did not change significantly over the course of the intervention, their scores improved on six of the target items

at post-test, thus indicating possible vocabulary gains.

As innovative and entertaining it may be, the TRS has yet to establish its links with learning outcomes. In other words, it remains unclear whether using such ICT reading materials does result in the acquisition of new vocabulary items. In the Carreira-Matsuzaki et al. study, a majority of the children's stated positive comments were concerned with the features of the TRS stylus, and not so much with the actual stories read or vocabulary included therein. Further, the books used for the programme were originally targeted at English-L1 children in English-speaking environments. It is therefore plausible that some of the materials, if not all, were not comprehensible enough for the EFL children to independently attend to print as well as pictures for meaning construction. These concerns highlight the need for complementing out-of-class 'fun' reading activities with more systematic in-class instruction with a literacy-related component (e.g., rich interactive discussion of the materials, drawing inferences or conclusions), as observed in the other interactive storytelling interventions as described above.

Bridging a gap between research and practice for future interventions

The brief sketch of oral reading interventions described thus far indicates that, regardless of language or context in which the language is being learnt, oral language acts as a powerful catalyst for subsequent literacy development in young learners in school settings. Having said that, one would reasonably agree that recognising this importance and bringing it into practice are two separate matters. This is of particular significance in the Japanese FL context. As of 2012, only 3.9 per cent of the primary schools in the Nation have on-site specialist teachers (i.e., those with expertise in fields surrounding second language teaching and learning) teach classes of FLA, whereas in 73 per cent of the schools, FLA is taught by generalist teachers who also teach other subject-matter areas.

Effectively then, these generalist primary school teachers, although equipped with years of teaching experience and skilful at understanding children, may be unfamiliar with ways to promote early literacy through FL instruction and theories behind such interventions (Mol et al., 2009). A recent meta-analysis of interactive storytelling by Mol et al. (2009) showed that much better controlled oral language interventions were given by researchers, in comparison to teachers. This reality emphasises the ever-growing need for supporting primary school teachers with sufficient opportunities for teacher training and professional development (Emery, 2012; MEXT, 2013), which could contribute to the wider-scale implementation of early literacy interventions.

Concluding remarks

As shown in the discussion developed thus far, although non-exhaustive, evidence strongly suggests that interactive storytelling is one of the key activities required in supporting oral language development in young learners. It serves as a solid foundation upon which to build language competence of a more systematic nature. This holds true of young FL learners in Japan whose exposure to the target language is limited in quantity and quality relative to those exposed to the target language through being schooled entirely in that language (e.g., the L2 context). Early literacy provision is of critical importance for primary pupils in Japan

to be able to make the smooth transition from oracy-based FLA to more formal FL instruction entailing the integration of four skills. Increased collaboration between researchers and (especially, non-specialist) teachers would be necessary so that teachers would be better supported via professional and specialised training, which should contribute to an implementation of interactive reading techniques of high rigour in the wider Japanese FL context.

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